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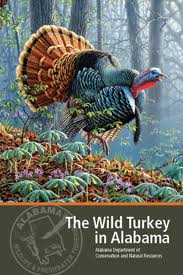
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Alabama: Taking Steps to Conserve Wildlife

Fishing and hunting are arguably the two most favorite pastimes of many Alabamians. However, one of the most pressing environmental issues also facing Alabama is the conservation of the many types of wildlife that live here. In order to ensure that fishing and hunting will continue to be a central part of many Alabamian’s lives, Alabama is taking strides against wildlife depletion. Alabama conserves wildlife for the future through restoring and conserving wildlife habitats, implementing education programs to teach about conservation, placing limits on fishing, and enforcing limits on hunting.

 One of the main ways wildlife is conserved in Alabama is through restoring and conserving the habitats that house the many different species that live here. One way that marine habitats are conserved is through designating seaweed beds with signs keeping out boaters. Before many of these hubs of marine wildlife were discovered, they were unable to be seen by boaters. By looking at aerial photographs of waterways, it is very evident where motors have cut through the seaweed making permanent scars in the bed. Now, they are marked off by signs designating them as “no motor” zones. One example of conserving wildlife through setting restrictive areas is the setup of wildlife management areas for turkeys: specific areas where turkeys can and cannot be hunted. An astonishing example of this involves a span of a mere 10 years. In 1995, 874 wild turkeys were killed and recorded by hunters in comparison to the 1,395 turkeys taken in the 2004 season (“Check Out WMAs for Turkeys”). These numbers are a direct parallel to the actual turkey growth. Because there were more wild turkeys, there were more turkeys killed. Since it is impossible to record the actual number of wild turkeys, biologists must rely on the amount of turkeys killed to estimate the number of actual turkeys. There are many organizations and programs in place in order to conserve the habitats that provide a home to the many different types of wildlife in Alabama.

A major way that the idea of conservation is spread is through conservation education. There are many programs available to teachers and students today including Project Wild. It is a program that has many activities for students and teachers designed to teach youth about the conservation of ecological systems and the wildlife they house. Aquatic Wild is a similar program that is aimed at youth in order to teach them about the conservation of aquatic ecological systems and habitats (“Conservation Education”). Another major organization for conservation education on the Gulf Coast is the Gulf of Mexico Alliance. This organization’s mission is to take the first steps in conservation of coastal ecosystems and habitats and ultimately increase ecosystem services and habitat quality and quantity (Habitat Conservation & Restoration”). These programs can help people, from students to adults, learn about good habits to protect our wildlife and to preserve Alabama’s wild animals.

The main way that aquatic wildlife is conserved for the future is placing limits on fishing. The Marine Resources Division manages the saltwater resources and estuaries along the Gulf Coast. It monitors and assesses Alabama’s marine fisheries, does extensive research, and enforces many of the laws surrounding marine conservation. The Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division conserves, enhances, protects, and manages the freshwater fishing resources. The extensive freshwater resources include 23 public fishing lakes, 77,000 miles of streams, rivers, the Mobile Delta, and 47 reservoirs, each larger than 500 acres that cover a total area of 551,220 acres (“Fishing Alabama”). Many species have strict seasons that you can catch them. One main species is the abundant Red Snapper, but even a plentiful species still needs to be protected through fishing seasons. Red Snapper season for the summer of 2012 lasted from June 1st to July 10th, with a two per person limit with a minimum size of sixteen inches (“Red Snapper Season”). For almost all species of fish, there is a minimum limit on the size that you can keep. Alabama’s vast fishing resources are a main area of focus for conservation.

 Hunting various animals is a favorite pastime of many Alabamians, and the main way that wildlife are conserved for this activity is through enforcing limits on hunting. These limits vary from size of animal, time of year you can hunt, the areas and methods one uses to hunt, and how many you can take in one season. Size of the animal is not as influential in hunting because it is often a non-issue – either the animal is a young animal that you will not kill, or a mature animal able and fit to be harvested. Conservation is often aided and put into action through hunting seasons. One example is deer season. By the time deer season starts, the new deer that were born in the spring are often able to survive without their parents. Even still, it is illegal to kill a doe with a yearling fawn with spots. For deer, you can only take one antlered buck a day. You can kill three antlered bucks in all three combined deer seasons, and one must have at least four antler points one inch or longer on one antler. For deer, there are actually three seasons within the one general time period of October-February, all using different weapons- the earliest season includes bow and arrow, as well as hand-thrown spear. The second season includes muzzleloaders, and the final season includes rifles and shotguns. There are two seasons for most counties within rifle and shotgun season that either prohibit or allow dogs to aid in the hunt (“Deer Hunting Seasons”). There are also many restrictions and seasons on other animals including turkeys, birds, bobcats, squirrels, rabbits, and raccoons. These laws are enforced strictly through local game wardens, and wildlife can be recorded through tagging the animals killed and reporting them to online resources. The information, including the ratio of bucks to does killed, as well as average weights and antler sizes from year to year, can be examined by wildlife biologists who can give ideas on changing seasons or bag limits in order to conserve wildlife in the most effective way possible. For example, if there is a significantly less amount of deer killed in one area from year to year, there might be a drought, disease, or food shortage. Gathering data can help wildlife biologists pinpoint an area to study and figure out what is wrong.

Since the beginning of Alabama’s history, it has been regulating hunting and fishing. More recently, as poachers and greedy hunters began to take more than their fair share of game, the state has needed to take more drastic measures in enforcing these laws. Not only have they become stricter, but they have also placed measures protecting the homes of these animals, and have significantly increased the game count. As with the example of the wildlife management areas of turkeys, these are very successful measures that can save the homes of the animals that Alabamians are dedicated to protecting and serving. Alabama is extremely dedicated on conserving both aquatic and land game, as well as their homes.

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